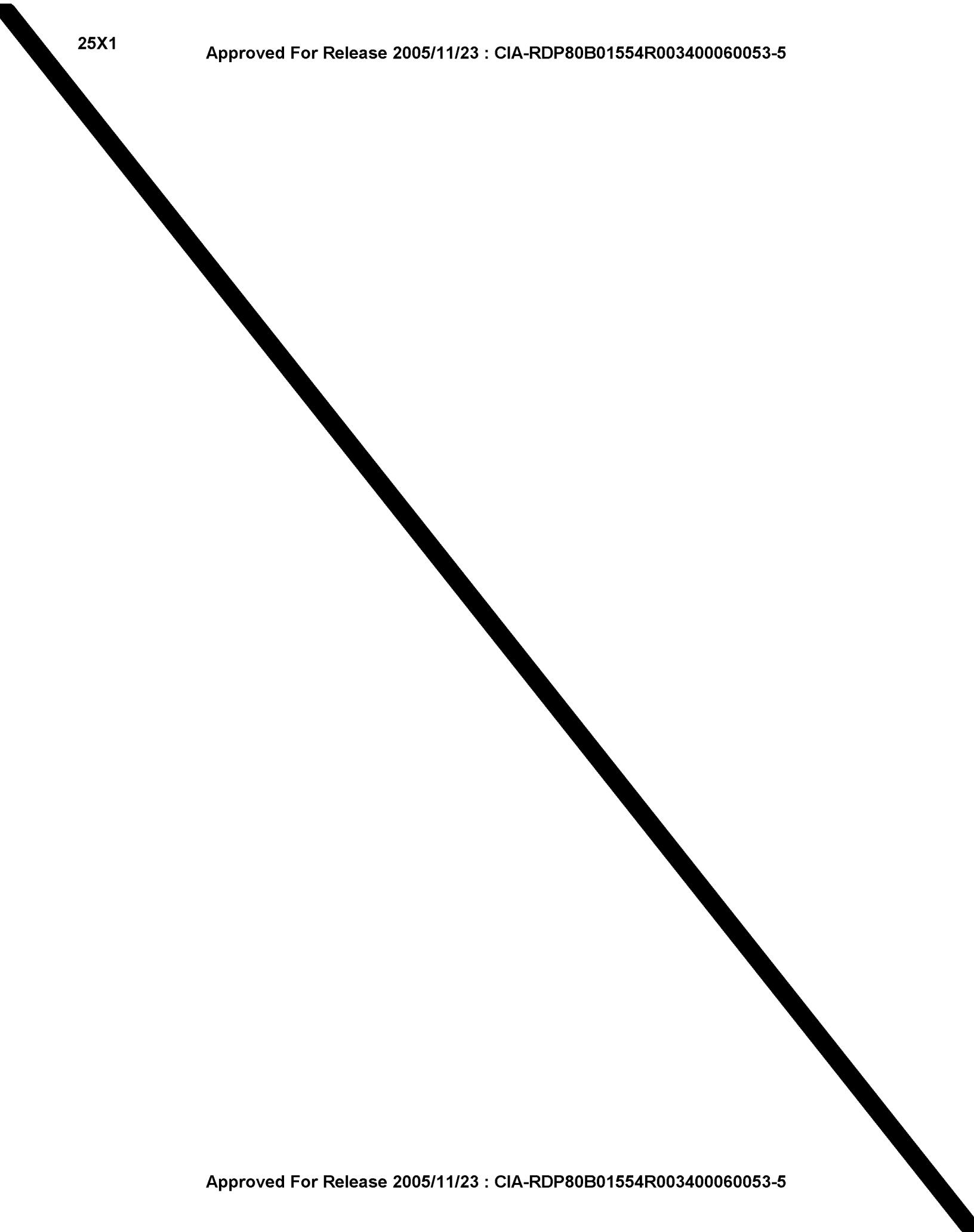

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NEW TIMES
26 June 1978

Party Lines/by Robert Shrum

CARTER ON ZAIRE: NO MORE MR. NICE GUY

In the spring of 1977, when Katangan rebels invaded Zaire, the Carter Administration made so small a fuss about the raid that few Americans were even aware of it. "We could have made nearly as good—or bad—a case against the Cubans for being involved then as we can now," says a State Department source, but last year the Carter foreign policy was premised on negotiating a SALT treaty. While the President lambasted the Soviets for human rights violations, he was chary of reigniting the Cold War. Since the imperative at that time was to nurture detente, the Carter Administration maintained that no Cubans participated in the secessionists' invasion from Angola.

But suddenly this spring, ever since a force of nearly 2,000 French and Belgian paratroopers, assisted by 18 U.S. jet transports, routed the latest rebel invasion of Zaire's Shaba region (formerly Katanga province), the Administration has been castigating the Soviet Union, in Carter's words, for its continued "interference in the internal affairs of African nations," and making every effort to implicate Cuban troops in the raid. Carter's harder line has been dictated by a new political expediency. A SALT agreement can't pass the Senate this year, and the President's approval rating has plummeted. In this mid-term election year, Carter has seized on the Zaire crisis just as previous presidents have looked abroad to bolster their sagging standing at home. Yet, in harping on the Cubans' role in the May 13 invasion of Zaire, Carter is both standing on shaky ground and in jeopardy of killing any SALT treaty's chances for Senate ratification.

The Cubans have persistently denied any complicity in that assault. Ramon Sanchez-Parodi, the chief of the Cuban Interest Section in Washington, sought out George McGovern, who helped shape the brief Cuban-American mini-detente, and insisted that Cuban troops were involved only in those African countries where a generally recognized government had requested their help; they had not, and would not, involve themselves with guerrilla forces crossing national borders. McGovern promptly reported Parodi's

reassurances to the Administration. Cuban President Fidel Castro called in Lyle Lane, Parodi's American counterpart in Havana, and reiterated the message.

When State Department spokesman Thomas Reston branded Castro a liar at the insistence of an angry Zbigniew Brzezinski, the President's National Security Adviser, the Cubans tried again, this time at the United Nations. Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodriguez contacted McGovern, who is serving as a congressional delegate to the Special Session on Disarmament. Cuba, Rodriguez explained, had not had anything to do with the Katangan rebels since 1976, when they had fought on the same side in the Angolan civil war. Once again the South Dakota senator briefed the White House.

This time, in a prepared statement at the beginning of his May 26 press conference, Carter himself blasted Cuba for backing the Katangans. But even while sounding a general alarm, Carter [illegible] charges. He said he only believed the Cubans had been aware of the Katangan plan, but knew that they "played a key role in training and equipping" the rebels. That knowledge, though, leaves ample room for ignorance on the central question: When did the Cubans play their role? If it was during the Angolan civil war over two years ago, as Cuban Vice President Rodriguez says, the current crisis becomes a tempest in a time capsule. The President also blamed the Cubans for not restraining the Kantangans, which, one official objects, is "like blaming the U.S. for having troops in Turkey and not forcibly preventing the Turkish invasion of Cyprus."

Carter hedged his attack, a State Department source confides, because the Administration lacked convincing evidence of Cuban involvement. Following the President's press conference, Administration members scrambled to assemble a credible case against Cuba. An official familiar with the resulting "proof" characterizes it as "soft, and in some cases, laughable." For instance, the CIA supposedly has a letter written by a Kantangan rebel leader to a friend in Zambia expressing gratitude for Cuban help. The letter doesn't specify the character or timing of the help; it could be referring to Cuban assistance during the Angolan civil war. Sources briefed on the letter also report that the identity and importance of the Kantangan leader and the reliability of his Zambian friend are all unclear. Says a disgruntled official of this "proof": "It's typically feeble."

To build its case against Cuba, the Administration selectively leaked its "best evidence" to hard-line columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. They reported that several days before the invasion the U.S. had intercepted coded messages revealing Cuban foreknowledge and participation in the raid. A congressional adviser regards this revelation as inherently incredible. If Washington knew in advance, he asks, why wasn't Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko warned? Why did the U.S. wait for nearly 100 Europeans and an estimated 1,000 Africans to be slaughtered in Shaba? Furthermore, in a closed session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 12, the day before the invasion, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance discussed the Cuban presence in Africa, but gave no hint of any impending threat to Zaire.

In the end, it may turn out that Fidel Castro wasn't lying—and that Jimmy Carter was technically truthful. As CIA Director Stansfield Turner told reporters after he testified on that question before the House Intelligence Committee on June 5, "This [illegible] statement that Cubans were in Zaire or they were not. The evidence is not that clear one

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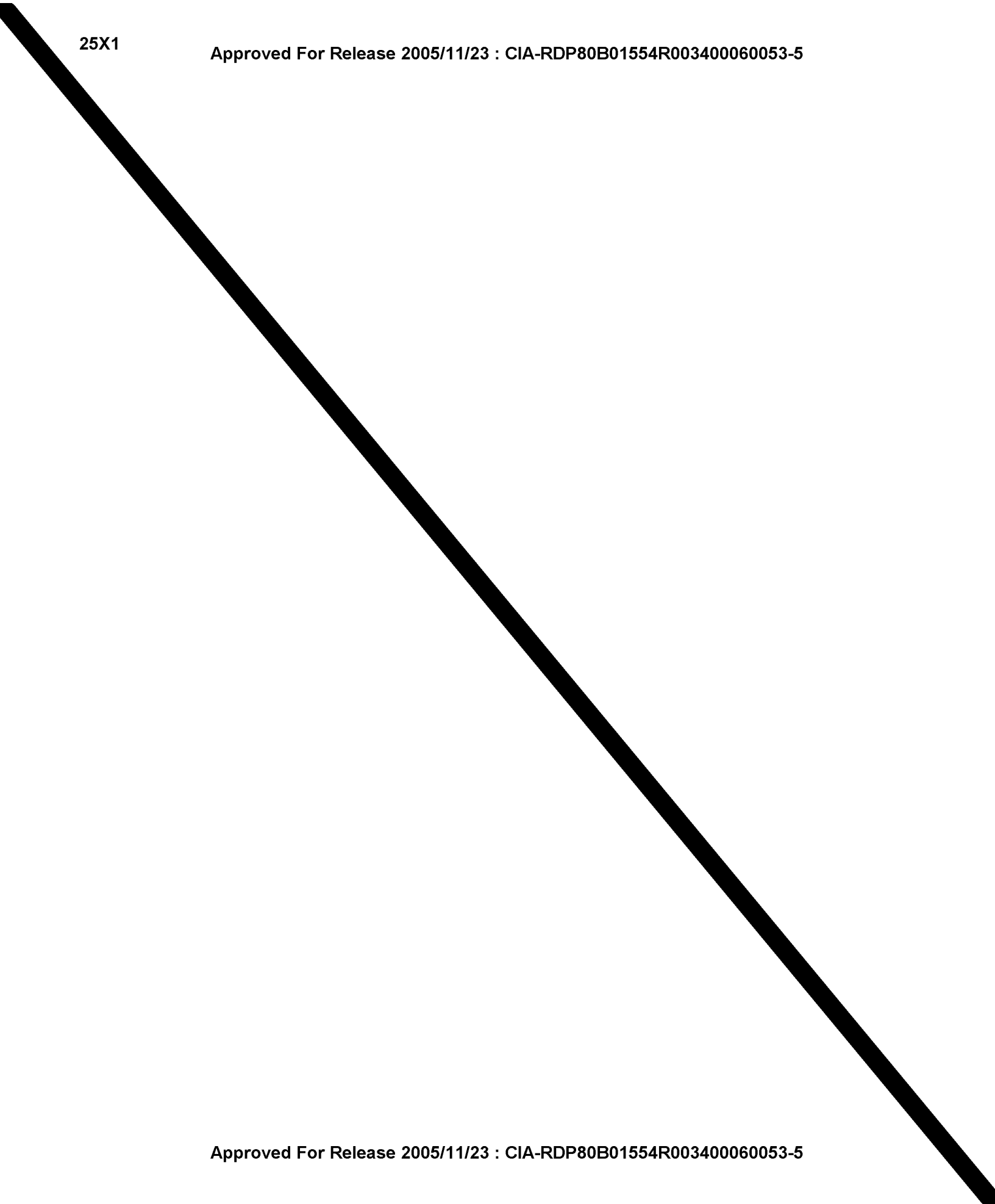

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